

Learning through Experience

Using Games to Explore Visual Art with Young Children

Sean and his preschool classmates sit on the museum floor in front of a still life painting. As the children look at the painting, their teacher explains a simple game they will play that involves all of the colors in the painting. She holds up a color spinner and explains that each child will take a turn spinning for a color and then looking at the painting to find the same color.

Sean takes his turn with the spinner. With one flick, the arrow points to green. "Green!" exclaim Sean's classmates. After studying the still life for a moment, Sean says, "I see it; I see green!" He points to a bunch of grapes. His teacher responds, "You see green in the grapes? Good observation! Now, look really closely at the grapes. Is the color of the grapes the same, or do you notice differences within the green?" The children grow quiet as they turn their attention to the painting. Several children excitedly share their observation that, in fact, the green grapes have areas that are dark green and other areas that are lighter green.

As the teacher acknowledges the children's observations, she poses a new question to encourage the children to think through the artist's color choices: "Does anyone have an idea about why the artist used darker and lighter shades of green to paint the grapes?"

Form of art refers to the specific type of artwork, such as sculpture, painting, drawing, printmaking, ceramics, or photography.

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The author thanks the staff and children at the Denver Art Museum for allowing her to explore art with them. Many of the ideas in this article evolved from her work with the education staff at the museum during the 2005 summer art camps.

These preschoolers' engagement in the game and their conversations about art show the benefits of using games to introduce visual artworks to young children. Teachers can use games to help young children

experience the visual arts in ways that are both meaningful and understandable during the early childhood years (Eckhoff 2008).

Children's active engagement in both looking at and making art provides rich opportunities for learning about the various mediums and forms of art from many different cultures and time periods. While art-making activities are a major

component of many early education curricula, experiences viewing art are still noticeably lacking (Colbert & Taunton 1992). In spite of strong support from the visual arts and early childhood communi-

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tles advocating for the inclusion of art appreciation in preschool and the primary grades (NAEA 1994; ECAE 2006; Copple & Bredekamp 2009).

The Task Force on Children's Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight (1998) recommends that teachers design art activities that expose young children to works of art that are meaningful and relevant to children's everyday experiences. This means that art experiences should connect to children's knowledge and experiences, while following a logical sequence that gradually builds their knowledge of the artistic process.

Art-viewing experiences are an important part of the knowledge-building process and require careful planning and unique teaching strategies. One teaching strategy involves an activity most young children enjoy—playing games.

Medium refers to the material or technique used by an artist to create a work of art. Some examples are sculptures in bronze or stone, wire or papier-mâché; paintings in oils, acrylics, or watercolors; drawings in pencil, charcoal, crayon, or pen and ink.

What Is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy is a set of skills that help a viewer interpret and construct meaning from visual images. A child looking at a reproduction of Dorothea Lange's iconic Depression era photograph, *Migrant Mother*, may say, "Why does she look so sad?" The child is using her own knowledge of emotions to build her understanding of the image. Or a child drawing a picture of her own mother may show that her mother is happy by drawing a smiling face. When teachers facilitate young children's observations and conversations about paintings, sculpture, photography, ceramics, and other media, they encourage children to develop an understanding of the communicative power of visual art.

Choosing a game

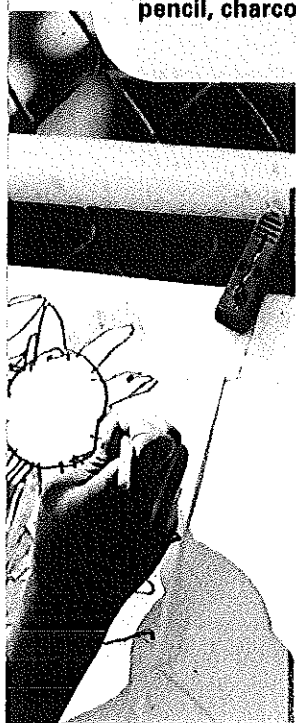
Rules for games vary in complexity. Choose games that match the skills and abilities of the children in your classroom, based on your knowledge of their interests and developmental levels. Games such as Eye Spy ("I spy with my little eye . . .") and games using spinners are familiar to many young children, and they can play them in pairs or as a group. More complex art exploration games can involve storytelling and memory skills. You might ask a child to study and remember specific details, like the many different shapes seen in cubist artworks, such as Pablo Picasso's *Three Musicians (Musiciens aux masques)*, to share with other children.

As children gain experience viewing artworks, you can increase the complexity of both the games and the artworks. "Games That Encourage Visual Exploration" (p. 20) describes six games appropriate for children ages 2 through 8 that can be tailored for use with a variety of artworks. As children learn to play visual exploration games, you can extend the games by simply changing the focus of a familiar game to a different element of art. Explorations of elements of art can include discussions of color, value (lightness or darkness of a color), form, line, space, shape, and texture. The game Eye Spy can begin by inviting children to explore the many colors in Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach*. The next iteration of the game using *Tar Beach* can explore a different element, such as texture.

Teachers can also extend games by introducing new artwork to explore. Children can first play Where Are You? with a painting they are already familiar with, exploring the idea of putting themselves into the painting. This game encourages children to examine the expressive qualities of the artwork—such as feelings evoked by Vincent van Gogh in his painting *The Starry Night*—and the content of the painting—the village and the evening sky. As children become more comfortable talking about what a painting

Visual exploration games

Games are a great way to start conversations about art. Even for adults with experience in the visual arts, talking about works of art can be intimidating. Visual exploration games guide children in looking closely at, thinking about, and talking about art. They give teachers a framework for extending children's observations, understandings, and conversations about art. Games with artworks encourage young children to "read" visual images (Arltpe & Styles 2003). Learning to read images is an important aspect of visual literacy (see "What Is Visual Literacy?").



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Games That Encourage Visual Exploration

Art Viewing Game	Materials	How to Play
Spinner game	Color or shape spinner Art reproduction or artwork	Children spin and search the art for the selected color or shape. The game can be played individually or as a group.
Go Find	A selection of art reproductions or artworks Cards with pictures of objects, colors, shapes, animals, or people represented in the artworks	Children draw a card and search among the images to find the object, color, and so on, depicted on their card.
Eye Spy	Art reproduction or artwork Magnifying glass or binoculars	In a take on the traditional Eye Spy game, a child declares, "I spy with my little eye . . ." and the group explores the artwork to locate the image, object, emotion, color, or other attribute specified by the child.
Just One Thing	Art reproduction or artwork	In large or small groups, children take turns stating "just one thing" about the artwork.
Memory	Art reproduction or artwork	Individually or as a group, children sit down and examine the image for two minutes. The teacher then turns the image face down and asks each child to describe the one detail she or he remembers most clearly. The teacher might also ask, "What shape did you see?" "What was happening in the artwork?" "What color was used the most?"
Where Are You?	Art reproduction or artwork Magic wand or magic bell	Individually or as a group, children examine the image for two to three minutes. The teacher explains that when he waves the magic wand (or rings the magic bell), they will be small enough to jump into the artwork. While studying the art, each child decides where he or she will land in the image. After the children have "jumped" into the image, they take turns describing where they have landed. The teacher can ask questions like, "Where are you?" "What are you doing there?" "What does it feel like?" "What does it smell like?" "Where are you going next?"

feels like or what is going to happen next in the painting, introduce a new work of art to challenge and extend their experiences. A novel artwork, perhaps involving a different medium or another artist, can prompt new responses to familiar questions. The applications of these six games are numerous, limited only by the players' imaginations.

Selecting artworks

Choosing artworks to explore involves the careful selection of images from a variety of cultures, forms of art, and time periods. Sean and his classmates were fortunate to explore original works of art in a museum gallery. While there is no real replacement for looking at an original artwork, a collection of high-quality reproductions makes it possible to offer art experiences in the classroom every day. Regular

art viewing and games using print reproductions help children develop a repertoire of observational skills.

In addition to selling print reproductions, such as postcards and posters, many museums and art galleries provide virtual tours of works in their permanent collections and current exhibitions. Web resources can give classrooms easy and free access to the world's greatest artworks.

You don't need to limit children's art explorations to formal paintings, sculpture, and photography. You can play visual exploration games and initiate conversations using high-quality children's book illustrations (Jalongo 2004). Children's books awarded the

Caldecott Medal are one source of such illustrations. (For a list of award-winning children's books, go to the American Library Association's Web site, www.ala.org, and search for *notable children's books*.)

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Whether you use illustrations from children's books, images from the Internet, or print reproductions, art for use in visual exploration games should be rich and engaging in content, offering many opportunities for observation and discussion. Keep in mind the interests and cultural backgrounds of the children in the class and choose artwork they can identify with or relate to (Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell 2003). Young children enjoy exploring two-dimensional images from artists spanning the romantic movement, like William Blake and Eugène Delacroix, to the pop art movement, like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Images of three-dimensional artworks by contemporary artists, such as Nancy Graves and Luis Jiménez, can be explored alongside the intriguing images of masks from Africa, Mexico, and American Indian cultures.

When choosing artworks for the classroom, keep in mind the degree to which they provide open opportunities for creative reflection, allowing children to make personal observations based on their indi-

vidual interests, experiences, and ideas (Finnegan 2001). For example, images of Henri Matisse's innovative paper cutouts (*papiers coupés*) *The Sorrows of the King* and *The Snail* can be engaging and intriguing to young children because of their own experiences with collage art. Selecting representations of art from various forms of art, geographic locations, time periods, and cultures gives children a window on the diverse traditions of the art world. In this respect, art-viewing experiences will surely enrich the educational experiences and arts-focused conversations in the classroom.

It is important for teachers to listen to children's conversations about art that occur during game play. Through careful attention to children's observations and questions, teachers can offer responses that build on children's observations to scaffold and develop their knowledge of the visual art world.

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HighReach Learning Curriculum Makes It Easy

Step 1: Gather

Information to uncover what your children know.

Know	Want to Know	Learned
<p>She is all over my body.</p> <p>I have brown dots on my skin.</p> <p>Some animals have fur on their skin.</p>	<p>How do we take care of our skin?</p> <p>What are the lines on my fingers?</p> <p>Do fruits and vegetables have skin?</p>	

Want to Know

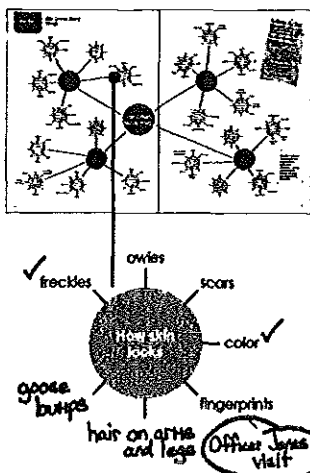
How do we take care of our skin?

What are the lines on my fingers?

Do fruits and vegetables have skin?

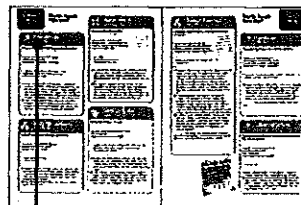
Step 2: Customize

our detailed Concept Web.



Step 3: Choose

activities based on children's interests and desired outcomes.



Fingerprints I Wonder

Discover how fingerprints are unique to each of us.

Aligns with:

- Scientific Skills and Methods 11, 12, 13
- Scientific Knowledge 12
- Invasive and Outlying ARE, ARE, ARE

Prerequisite:

- Fingerprint and Magnifying Glass Conversation Card
- Work index cards and magnifying glass
- Unbreakable magnifying glass

Overview:

Place the Fingerprint and Magnifying Glass Conversation Card on the table. What do children see? How do they see it? In the magnifying glass? Can children see fingerprints on their own fingers? Would they be able to see their fingerprints if they were magnified? Provide unbreakable magnifying glasses for them to find out.

Other children: Mark index cards and write the ink pads. Invite them to explore making their own.

Step 4: Plan

your weekly lessons and have fun!

Monday	Tuesday
<p>Do Do Do Do</p> <p>Fingerprints</p>	<p>Do Do Do Do</p> <p>Prickly Pincapples</p>
<p>Do Do Do Do</p> <p>Skin Care</p>	<p>Do Do Do Do</p> <p>Protecting My Skin</p>
<p>Do Do Do Do</p> <p>Our Skin</p>	<p>Do Do Do Do</p> <p></p>

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Bridging art-viewing and art-making experiences

A balanced early childhood arts curriculum includes regular interactions with art, opportunities for aesthetic experiences, and opportunities to create art (Eglinton 2003). Teachers can integrate art-viewing and art-making experiences by giving children opportunities to connect their observations about a particular work of art to a related art-making activity (Mulcahey 2009). For example, after a spinner game exploring shapes and colors, invite children to create collages featuring the shapes they encountered in the game. Or use children's conversations about Monet's garden paintings to inspire an *en plein air* (outdoor) painting session.

When early childhood educators bring together art viewing and art making, they help young children see their own artwork as connected to the work of the artists they have come to know and appreciate.

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